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# Tradition, modernity and gender in the Arab home: a study from Tripoli (Libya)

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## Abstract

This socio-spatial study explores the meaning of home in an Arab context in terms of the response of residents to three case study sites that reflect different eras of development and involve different house types- traditional courtyard houses in the Medina and two collective housing estates. Based upon the triadic distinctions of Lefèbvre, a mixed methodology is applied to these case study sites, with relevant information coming from interviews and focus groups with architects and residents, a satisfaction survey and a space syntax analysis. Unlike many previous studies, the interviews and focus groups document the experience and views of female residents. The results highlight the continuing impact of religion and culture on the meaning of the home. The Arab-Libyan home constitutes a family and a feminine ideal, based on gender segregation and female privacy. The traditional courtyard house offers a suitable house type, but not the only possible type that meets the practices and preferences of Arab Libyan families.

Key words: comparative housing, planning, privacy, courtyard housing, Arab-Islamic culture

The aim of this study is to examine the meaning and design of the home in Libyan, Arab society, with ‘home’ understood as an assemblage of spaces, practices, objects associated with those practices and representations of spaces. The research question is whether and how a set of traditional cultural and religious practices have created a distinctive concept of home, one that is based on a particular concept of privacy and gender relations and that has distinctive layout, design and other material implications. Answering this question serves, in turn, to bridge a double gap in the published research- a gap in the international housing literature where the Arab home is seldom discussed and a gap in studies of Arab domestic architecture where women residents have seldom been given an explicit voice. This study, with interviews undertaken by a female architect, reports the views of female as well as male occupants in a specific location in the Arab world.

## Background

Since the 1950s, the wealth associated with the exploitation of oil and other types of economic development have transformed Arab cities, changing internal and external spaces in a way that, according to the critics, fails to respect tradition and lifestyles (Shawesh, 2000). In this context, a tension and conflict has emerged between tradition,

modernisation and by extension Westernisation- a tension and conflict that has led to a revival in the use of traditional clothing, including the veil (El Guindi 1999) and led, in addition, to a renewed interest in traditional forms of Arab housing, including the courtyard house (Allafi, 2010: Al-Haroun, 2015).

The debates about Arab housing and the Arab home have been almost wholly neglected in international housing journals, however. Instead, debates have been framed predominantly through the experience in Europe, North America and Australia (Atkinson and Jacobs 2016: Mallett 2004) or, as is apparent in the feminist literature (McCarthy 2018: Munro and Madigan (1993, 41), the tendency has been to assume that relevant concepts, notably those associated with privacy, are universal in character. In contrast, El Guindi (1999, 81) argues that the meaning of ‘privacy’ in the English language fails to grasp the nuances in the use of space in the Arab world. Instead, quoting earlier work from Sciama (1993), privacy is defined from an Arab viewpoint as ‘the need for individuals, families or other social groups, to separate themselves from others at certain times, for certain well-defined activities’.

Privacy in the Arab world includes gender separation. Yet, apart from a study of 24 Qatari families by Sobh and Belk (2011a: 2011b), existing publications say little about the contemporary experience and views of female occupants. Many researchers have been male and, in a gender segregated society, have lacked access to female occupants. An earlier study by Emhemed (2005, 189) of housing in Libya noted, for example, that many women refused to respond to a questionnaire ‘for customs and cultural reasons.’

Lack of access is not the only reason for the neglect of gender. Researchers have instead emphasised the environmental sustainability of the courtyard house (Almansuri et al 2010) or have focused mainly on the views of designers as in a study of Kuwait by Al-Haroun (2015). This latter nevertheless is helpful in reporting a series of workplace meetings and in showing how popular preferences for a courtyard house run alongside and conflict with financial priorities and other consumer desires (ibid, 298). Other accounts, whilst dealing in part with gender, have preferred a general discussion based on

religious texts, architectural forms or historical and other secondary sources (Campo 1991; Rabbat 2010; Webster 1984).

The paper is divided into different sections as follows: The first section, 'Levels and aspects of social reality' is about the analytical framework, including interpretations of privacy and the home. The second section 'Application of a multi-level methodology' is about the detailed research design. The subsequent sections entitled 'Professional conceptions of the Libyan home' and 'Space as lived' report the results, whilst the 'Discussion' section interprets the results in the light of the existing literature.

### **Levels and aspects of social reality**

Studies of user response in housing in economically advanced countries have become more common in the past decade, notably with the growth of innovative low energy designs and technologies. The studies are generally either about the qualitative experience and views of users or about their levels of consumer satisfaction (Ambrose et al 2017). A study of 'user response' in the context of modernisation and Westernisation implies a more self-conscious, multi-level approach and requires an initial, brief detour into the history of studies of modern architecture and its impact on the everyday use of the home.

### ***An epistemological framework***

'Le Corbusier's Pessac' by Boudon ([1969] 1985) provides a possible precedent, showing how the design of a model modernist estate had over time been appropriated and altered by residents. The result had reduced the aesthetic sense of modernity but increased the usability of the dwelling and had added many personal touches. For Boudon, therefore, the ability of residents to modify the dwellings to their own needs was a measure of flexibility and a mark of the success of the original designs.

A preface by Lefèbvre ([1969] 1985, ix-x) explained why 'Le Corbusier's Pessac' was of more than of local or passing relevance. It had, in the words of Lefèbvre, advanced the study of urban phenomena through distinguishing between three levels of social reality and three levels of thinking about that reality: 1) an abstract level of theory, mixed

with ideology at which architects and professional designers work out their ideas with or in opposition to various institutions and government: 2) the level of application whereby architects confront the reality of sites: 3) the level of urban practice, whereby users appropriate space and so produce difference and specific lifestyles. Together, the three levels offered a framework for the collection, presentation and analysis of different viewpoints and aspects of the home and urban space.

Later, in 'The Production of Space', Lefèbvre ([1974] 2007) clarified the task of analysis as one of defining a logical and epistemological framework rather than a specific theory of urban space (ibid 11-12) and, in addition, refined (ibid 33-39) the previous framework as a 'perceived—conceived—lived triad'. The conceived element is a continuation of the abstract level that mixes theory and ideology, includes urban planning theory. Otherwise, the revised triad deletes 'the level of application' and differentiates between two overlapping aspects of 'urban practice', namely 'lived space' as experienced and represented by its users and 'perceived space' in the sense of 'routes and networks which link up the places set aside for work, 'private' life and leisure', as shown in Figure 1.

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Figure 1

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The revised triad allow a richer understanding of housing in use, but at the cost of a simplified understanding of the design and development process. To provide an example, applying traditional notions of housing design, whether in Europe or in Arab countries, raises practical, site specific issues in relation to car parking, water and waste disposal and costs. Both the original and the revised triad of Lefèbvre share basic features, however. In both, the abstract level of theory and ideology/ representations of space and the concrete level of day to day practice interact, but not necessarily in a coherent or mutually supportive manner. For Lefèbvre, mass housing and capitalist urban development were prone to a tendency for the abstract process of design and planning to become detached from the practical needs of residents and citizens.

There are, of course, major differences between tradition and modernity in 20th century Europe and an Arab country such as Libya. In part, the difference is economic and concerns the distinction between the Global North and South (Watson 2009). In Arab and African countries, in informal and marginalized settlements, in areas of rapid urban growth and in areas with low or declining living standards, European and North American land use and building regulations become unworkable. They are either ignored and not implemented or have the effect of driving away and segregating the poor (Rizzo 2014: Sims 2013).

In addition, and this is the focus of the Arab literature, the difference is cultural. There is no direct Arab equivalent of the modern movement in architecture. Hassan Fathy (1986) is the best known 20th century Arab architect. His work was mostly an exercise in updating traditional Arab architecture and his main efforts were concerned with improving the living condition in rural, rather than urban, areas. The work of Fathy nevertheless served to promote the courtyard house as the quintessential Arab housing form. The courtyard house suits, according to Fathy, both the hot, climatic conditions of the region and the lifestyles of the population.

Courtyard housing exists elsewhere in the world. In South Australia, for example, internal courtyards have been used in experimental low energy houses, because they promote through ventilation and so moderate the impact of summer heat (Berry 2014). The Arab courtyard house is, nevertheless, a distinctive inward-looking house type by virtue of its layout as a hollow square, with a specific pattern of rooms arranged around a private open area that is closed to the outside, other than through a single entrance.

Fathy's ideas, like those of later critics, were based on a rejection of the direction of change in Arab cities and Arab architecture. In principle, modernisation and Westernisation are distinct. In a context, however, where modern ideas and practices originated in Europe and North America modernisation can easily be conflated with Westernisation and *vice versa*. The dominance of France and Britain as imperial powers in the Arab world and of Italy as a colonial power in Libya in the 1920s and 1930s had a similar effect. Later, from the 1950s and even more so from the 1970s onwards, a

changed economic world order led to an emphasis on globalisation as the main vector of change (Kiet 2011). Again, however, innovative ideas came and continue to come to the Arab world from elsewhere.

For some, such as Unwin (2000, 15) Lefèbvre's ideas are Eurocentric and not applicable elsewhere. In addition, one might argue, cultural criticism as evidenced in the debates about the Arab city, is not a major theme in Lefèbvre's work. The multi-level, oppositional character of Lefèbvre's frameworks nevertheless suggests a potential relevance to the Arab city even if this was not elaborated in any significant way (Kipfer & Goonewardena 2013; Sabry 2010). Likewise, the distinction between space as lived and as perceived has a potential relevance in recognising that the home is not just a functional mechanism, a means of supporting household activities, as is the implication of perceived space if examined in isolation. The use and form of the home also reflects views of the world that are constructed through history, culture, including local folk culture and religion (El-Aswad 2016).

### ***Privacy: lived space and perceived space***

Processes of Westernisation and modernisation are, moreover, particularly sensitive for housing design, as the home is closely related to lifestyles and to expectations about family life. Privacy does not figure as a major theme in Boudon's study, though the existence of private areas is recognised as a defining characteristic of the home. Privacy has featured, however, in both the international and the Arab literature, with a major distinction between the two.

In the international literature, privacy is commonly seen as an aspect of the role of the home as 'a retreat away from public scrutiny - a haven in a heartless world' (Munro and Madigan 1993, 29). In addition, privacy has come to be defined as a resource that can be used to express individuality. For example, Saunders and Williams (1988, 88) define privacy as 'essentially to freedom from surveillance. The right to be alone'.

Writing in the early 1900s, Simmel (1984 [1913]) defined the home as the intimate, feminine side of life within a predominantly impersonal and rationalising male culture.

Domestic privacy by implication was also a feminine value. In contrast, most recent accounts avoid bipolar distinctions between the male and female sides of life. Instead, they focus on household practices and suggest that these reflect and/ or subvert power relations concerning gender, age, and role and are open to negotiation. (Bowlby et al., 1997; Mallett, 2004). The character of power relations means that the home itself has a potentially 'dark side'. The home may become 'a prison in which they (women) are tied to a domestic treadmill and social isolation' (Madigan et al., 1990). Equally, the home has a comforting aspect as it is commonly associated with somewhere that is familiar (Massey 2005, 124), predictable, reliable and reassuring (Hiscock et al 2001: McCarthy 2018).

Traditional Islamic concepts of the home are different, because concepts of privacy are derived in part from interpretations of religious texts. El Guindi (1999, 77) refers, for example, to 'worldly' public space and 'sacred' private space- a phrase that itself reveals the significance of domestic privacy to the organisation of daily life in the Arab and Islamic world. Privacy, so understood, has 'two spheres- women and family' (El Guindi 1999, 82), albeit two spheres that overlap one another in terms of the spaces and rooms within the home (Othman et al 2015). The private zone of a home is a space for family members, whether male or female, where they are protected from the public eye. Equally it is a retreat and a resource for women, including female visitors, where non-kin males are excluded, with non-kin defined by a combination of religious and cultural conventions and by the interpretations of family members.

The Qatari study undertaken by Sobh and Belk (2011) shows that gender separation remains the ideal, at least amongst affluent families. The study reveals the

'significance of privacy and gender segregation as anchors for identity, both national and religious. Maintaining these anchors seems to help Qataris resolve cultural tensions and conflicts to which they feel subjected'.

In the Qatari study, domestic privacy ran alongside another traditional value, that of hospitality to guests, celebrated through the giving of sweets, coffee and other food. Together this combination of privacy and hospitality gave a sense of order, countered Westernisation as represented by material, conspicuous consumption and helped to define



a spatial ideal based on history and religion. The dwellings comprised detached villas surrounded by open space and surrounded again by high walls and gates.

The symbolism and implicit values of privacy are aspects of lived space. In addition, privacy involves perceived space- a combination of routines, lifestyle arrangements and spatial configurations that define the relation between different rooms. El Guindi (1999, 77) suggests that space is ‘fluid’ and subject to continuous construction and reconstruction. Nevertheless, the inward-looking Arab courtyard house is itself an example of a layout that promotes traditional Islamic concepts of privacy, according to detailed analyses by Emhemed (2005, 180) and Mustafa et al (2010) amongst others. The typical courtyard house promotes gender separation through the existence of multiple levels of access between the most private, intimate rooms and the outside. In contrast, the typical modern apartment has an internal arrangement that is more likely to lead to encounters between male visitors and female occupants (Emhemed 2005, 183).

### **Application of a multi-level methodology**

Recognition of different levels of analysis offers an epistemological strategy within which relevant methodologies may be identified and applied. Following the precepts of Lefèbvre, therefore, both the research method and its presentation has two aspects:

- 1) Interviews and a focus group intended to reveal the theories, ideologies, representations of space that are linked to societal forces and tendencies and impose order on processes of design.
- 2) A series of investigations of the practices, experiences and patterns at the ‘concrete’ level of social reality.

The first element, intended to reveal over-arching representations of space, is based on interviews, undertaken 2012, with thirteen architects and a focus group of five architects employed by a wide range of organisations- the government, the university and private consultancies. The interviews and focus groups with architects were conducted in Arabic by Elmansuri who then translated the transcripts into English.

The second element, the analysis of ‘concrete reality’ involves a comparison of different housing schemes. Tripoli, like many cities in the Middle East or elsewhere, has a housing stock that is of varied age, that is in various states of disrepair, that includes older abandoned or multi-occupied property and that also includes various types- villas, apartment blocks and courtyard housing. The selection of cases sought to include examples from different historic eras, the Ottoman, the Italian and the oil boom without including the homes of the poor or rich.

Accordingly, three cases were selected: an area of traditional courtyard houses from the Medina (the Ottoman era) and two residential clusters at Ka-Zalanges (the period of Italian occupation) and Al-Ghadamsi (the oil boom era), with communal courtyards for use by estate residents, but not internal courtyards. At an early stage in the research, these two residential clusters were commended by a senior architect for their quality. The selection of case studies has therefore avoided blocks and estates, such as large-scale, high rise estates, with known problems and a poor social reputation. The physical variations are summarised in the photographs in Figure 2 and the descriptions in Table 1. The courtyard houses are built to a high density and commonly depend on pedestrian rather than direct road access. The apartments at Ka-Zalanges are generally smaller, as measured by the number of bedrooms.

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Figure 2

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Table 1

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A combination of overlapping methods, a satisfaction survey, interviews, focus group discussions and an architectural analysis, was used to elicit social practices within the home. Studies of privacy and the meaning of the home are akin to anthropological studies that reveal a point of view, a distinct vision of the world and that, in doing so, allow a comparison of the similarities and difference with groups elsewhere (Engelke, 33). Priority is therefore given to qualitative responses in the interviews and focus group,

as these elicit meaning and give respondents the ability to express themselves in their own words (Ambrose et al 2017: Furbey and Goodchild 1986).

The occupancy evaluation/ satisfaction questionnaire was the first to be undertaken. It was intended to show whether and how far different aspects of a home are suited to the activities that routinely take place there in the light of the residents' expectations (Canter 1983). Self-completion survey forms were distributed by the author and by professional colleagues in January/March 2010. A total of 222 completed questionnaires were collected, which represents 69% of the 322 distributed questionnaires, as documented in Table 2. The list of aspects included in the questionnaire were intended to cover the main functional and cultural requirements of the Libyan home as derived from the prior observation of the researcher and the literature.

The returned questionnaires also provide information on the social composition of the schemes. As is common in the Middle East, household size was relatively large, with 70% of the households in all three schemes containing 6 or more persons, the largest households being found in the courtyard houses. All the households included a person, mostly a male person, in work in government, in teaching or one of the professions in either the private or public sector. The economic status may therefore be described as mostly prosperous by Libyan standards and neither rich nor poor.

The questionnaires were distributed to households and were not intended to reveal gender differences. The interviews and focus groups sought to rectify that gap as well as to provide more detail. Fifteen interviews, of eleven women and four men were conducted in August and September 2012, five from each case study area, with the sample comprising volunteers from the initial questionnaire surveys. The interviews were held in the respondents' homes, with the structure of the interview based on the themes developed in the questionnaire survey. Verbal consent from the respondents was obtained prior for recording their voices and photographing the interior of their house. The average amount of time spent per interview was one to two hours.

Further, seven women volunteers were selected for a focus group from the three case study areas. The purpose of the discussion was explained with a brief introduction to

the topics and session's subject. Also, an ethical protocol form accompanied the session's introduction, outlining the consent. The focus group took place in the home of one of the respondents in the Medina with the permission and consent of her family. Respondents were encouraged to participate in the study by illustrating their own day-to-day lives and eliciting extra detailed responses. To this effect, they were given a disposable camera with which to take photos of their home. During the open-ended interview sessions with the respondents' family members, the pictures taken were laid on a table and presented. The interviews and focus groups with residents were again conducted in Arabic by Elmansuri who translated the transcripts into English.

Both the interviews and the focus group excluded respondents living in multi-occupied houses. The questionnaire returns had included a number (14) of multi-occupied courtyard houses. However multi-occupation changes the character of domestic space and as multi-occupation was not encountered in Al-Ghadamsi or Ka-Zalanges, it would have been impossible to undertake a like-for-like comparison

Finally, to provide a description of the home as a physical artefact and to maintain comparability with earlier studies by Arab and Muslim researchers (Emhemed, 2005: Khattab 2005: Mustafa 2010), recourse was made to a simplified version of the 'space syntax' (Hillier et al 1987). This latter offers a notation for describing the relation between different rooms in a building and between the inside and outside and, in doing so, enables a measurement of 'permeability', meaning the number of doors or access points between a room and the front entrance. The space syntax has, as a result, according to its supporters, the potential to measure the degree of spatial privacy.

There are known limitations to the space syntax. Two dimensional diagrams of access lack an explicit reference to social meaning, as defined by residents or by other users and, in addition, exclude overlooking and sound as influences on privacy (Netto 2015: Osman and Suliman 1994). Different spatial arrangements may, nevertheless, be compared with one another. Moreover, used as supplement, rather than as a replacement to qualitative and other research methods, the space syntax offers a means of analysing

the dwelling at Lefèbvre's concrete level of social reality, revealing layout aspects and assumptions that might otherwise be hidden.

### **Professionals' conceptions of the Libyan home**

All the architects identified tradition as an influence on design. Tradition was, moreover, intimately connected to privacy and to religion. For example:

'...Privacy and religious considerations have always been taken into account in traditional Libyan homes. This reflects people's lifestyle and values. Being respectful of Islamic religious values has influenced architecture in Arab countries...The physical form of the traditional homes reflects the privacy concept, like a woman with a veil, she can see but cannot be seen.'

This same emphasis on privacy continued to affect the use of the home when guests were present.

'Male guests are entertained away from the centre of the home, while female guests are entertained in a special room inside the home. When such female guests are present, the males' movement is restricted while women have full freedom'.

Half of the house's area, it was reported, is devoted to entertaining guests and is intended for use only by guests and not the family.

The architects also noted that the courtyard house met traditional Libyan and Arab expectations and cited Hassan Fathy's ideas in this context. The courtyard house respected privacy as the room arrangement looked away from the street; it allowed a differentiation of function and activity, by gender and controlled whether the rooms are accessible to visitors. The courtyard house created a private open space for family use.

The principle idea of the traditional courtyard house, here the traditional *Trabelsi* house [Tripoli house], was based on privacy and suitability, and the key issues that promote the design are privacy, security, and control of access to spaces...'

However, the courtyard house ceased to be widely developed as a 20th century building type.

'...the Italians introduced new housing concepts [villa, walking-up flats] .... during the independence period, the courtyard concept was clearly absent, replaced by a central roofed room (*central hall cum living room*) with other home spaces on each side. .... after independence up to recent times, the courtyard concept was completely absent from housing developments...foreign developers have applied housing schemes...using features that Libyan users regarded as wasted space such as balconies...'

The regulatory framework, most notably the Planning and Building Act 1969, reinforced the tendency away from courtyard houses during the oil boom and the period from 1969 to 2011 when Libya was subject to an autocratic regime. The regulations specified a series of cases based on dwelling size and height, density and plot size, largely derived from Western models and rules and none of these easily fitted the requirements of the courtyard house.

The architects also stressed that people today demand more space and the use of space in Libyan houses had in any case evolved to adapt to new pressures and aspirations.

‘Current houses are a mixture of different representations of identity, the house is more of a sign of status than a functional space for personal comfort...for example, extensions/additional floors as family member increase, or to be rented out.’

An indication of this desire for space and privacy was the way in which residents adapted the existing housing stock- filling in the courtyards, building extensions or building up with additional storeys to accommodate an extended family.

In any case, governmental institutions had lost their ability to implement policies on a consistent basis and the occupants could make alterations with minimal intervention under building and town planning regulations. This latter posed a dilemma for the architects:

‘...the biggest challenge we have today is the client requirements for alterations/changes to the original layout. ... The problem is when you say it’s against the planning regulations. And when we go there, we find the minimal intervention by the planning authority manager regarding these alteration and changes’

However, the response of some architects was that these violations are due to archaic laws and regulations that need to be changed.

‘These violations are as a result of the poor codes of the planning and housing authority and public demands. How should people live and conceive their homes?... Who has the right to choose how to live and how you want your house to be? There is a big communication gap between the government policy and the public. People do not accept the codes as rules to follow strictly.’

The comments about building regulations and their increasingly limited powers of enforcement suggest a trend towards greater diversity of housing form. The courtyard

house remained the main focus of the discussion, however, including whether it continued to meet housing needs and expectations.

### **At home with the residents**

Satisfaction surveys provide an overview of user response to housing. The results of the satisfaction survey as shown in Table 2 offer a reminder that the quality of the home as defined by consumers is multi-faceted. No scheme scored consistently high average levels of satisfaction. The courtyard houses scored, on average, poorly on ‘off road carparking’, ‘kitchen size’ and the methods of ‘waste collection’, for example, but well on the form and function of the house, the number of bedrooms, the provision of reception rooms and privacy. Conversely, the collective housing estate at Ka-Zalanges generated less favourable average satisfaction ratings for the form and function of the house, the number of bedrooms, the provision of reception rooms. A degree of caution is nevertheless necessary in interpreting patterns in Table 2 as average levels of satisfaction with the internal layout in the courtyard houses are depressed by the inclusion of respondents living in multi-occupied dwellings.

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Table 2: Average levels of satisfaction

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### ***Space as lived***

The interviews and focus groups provide a richer understanding of home life and the concept of the home. A female respondent stated, for example: ‘the home is a place of domestic tranquility; and I feel that in mine.’ The same respondent went on to list other attributes of the home.

‘spaciousness’, ‘relaxation and distraction from work’, ‘being private indoors’, ‘a place of family, a meaning of collective life’, ‘home means a world, a private and own world. It is a place where I feel satisfied’, ‘a place where I socially perform (*interact as host with family and guests*) and privately entertain my guests’

### *The home, history and identity*

Other responses drew on the feelings of security, privacy, and family continuity. The home offered an ideal that was to an extent independent of the dwelling type. A female respondent living at Al-Ghadamsi situated the meaning of home in terms of family:

‘It is *housh-Alaila* [family home]. Home spaces, even the changes we made in the home would reflect our family history.’

Family roots, history, memories and experiences are also represented through details and objects in the home, particularly for long-time residents. A female respondent from a traditional home expressed how the details bring about a sense of home identity:

‘...the more the house was filled up with details the more it is rooted in memory. ... the house reflects what we do what we keep, and what is coexistent in our memories. A lot of things, objects, personal attachments and belongings are meaningful, they are part of the house, part of life.’

The objects and details of home life came to offer stories and memories and this again applied to all types of house.

Respondents were conscious of the distinction between indigenous, Arab and Western influences. For example, a male respondent from Ka-Zalanges praised the general form and layout of this residence whilst suggesting that the interior of the house lacked privacy in relation to the 'guest domain', exactly because it was of foreign origin.

‘it’s a nice neighbourhood, well designed and well built, it’s been built by the Italians...well known in Tripoli ... Only bedrooms are good in size, but we have concerns about guest-domain, but, anyway we are all right here’.

In contrast, respondents found the traditional courtyard houses were designed in a style, in which users find their history and identity. An elderly female noted:

‘I’ve the home I need... all I need...my private yard...I live here with my son and my grandchildren for over fifty years, space I love my house my neighbours who I grew up with...no alterations, no modifications were made.’

Similar favourable comments were common amongst those living in courtyard houses.

‘The Arab house layout is an original pattern...these houses ...symbolise the *housh-Trabelsi* [Arab house of Tripoli], where, in general Muslim family appreciate the spatial and cultural values...’



‘The house has special features which make it pleasant. Visitors feel at ease when they enter the house, they entertain themselves privately sitting in the courtyard, enjoying the sun while feeling protected from being overlooked or overheard’

As a result of these attributes, the traditional courtyard house was seldom altered, at least if occupied only by one family.

### *Gender differences in the home*

The meaning of the home was further revealed by the photographs that the respondents brought to the focus groups. Many of the photographs were of the general disposition of furniture and soft furnishings in different rooms and of the entrance and hallway. There were, however, significant differences between the different sites and between male and female respondents. Those living in the Medina courtyard homes produced photographs of architectural details- for example traditional door knockers, decorative ceramic wall tiles, intricate window screens. These were absent elsewhere. In addition, male respondents were more likely to produce photographs of the outside, whilst women tended to take photographs of the inside, their inner domain and sometimes photographs looking out from within the home. This inner domain also favoured pictures of food and drinks, notably tea and tea sets.

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### Figure 3: A female ‘private own world’

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The existence of this female private world might be interpreted as evidence of social control whereby women remain secluded, away from public interaction. Yet there was a reluctance in the women interviewed to reveal, explicitly, any negative aspect of current arrangements whatsoever. Instead, irrespective of where they lived, they emphasised the positive aspects of the home and upheld traditional social norms and religion as these defined the role and space of women.

‘I feel comfortable at home, which I don’t do in a public place. Clothes are different. I use a complete veil in public. I feel relaxed here without the *Veil* and *Abaya*. There’s more freedom at home.’

‘...There is no place better than to stay in to satisfy my religion and respect my position as a Muslim woman...’

The ability to relax was, nevertheless, put at risk in the presence of male visitors, as is apparent in the following comments.

‘...I feel uncomfortable when men are present at home, especially non-kin... Men are allowed to enter only the male social room ...The rest of the house ensures privacy...’  
‘...to mix up with men is against Islamic and social norms’

A few courtyard homes were sufficiently large to have a female as well as a male visitors’ room. Another respondent commented

‘I value my home, especially the private spaces...my bedroom, where I can read, pray and relax quietly, my family room, and most important the female visitors room which provides me and my guests with privacy. We provide this room for guests and not to be for family use....’

If a separate female visitors' room is absent, one of the bedrooms would be used as a temporary women’s living space with a flexible arrangement of moveable elements such as mattresses, cushions and the dining tray. In these ways, the female perspectives demonstrated the meaning of privacy, understood in Arab as ‘the need for separation’ of specific groups at specific times (El Guindi 1991, 81).

### ***Perceived space, privacy and room arrangements***

In terms of daily routines, the courtyard house offered of model that generally met the respondents’ lifestyles. As was stated by the female occupants of the courtyard house.

‘...open space in the house is very necessary space, it’s where people are close to nature and green sights when they’re at home...I can’t imagine a house without open space, especially a private open space’

For another woman living in a courtyard house, the layout of modern apartments did not meet her aspirations for privacy.

‘The patio (*the communal courtyard and other open space*) surrounds the house from four sides, these balconies, all made for a lot of wasted space...people don’t like being overlooked by neighbours or passers-by.’

Because the apartment was surrounded by open space, the balconies were overlooked and this reduced privacy.

### *The space syntax*

The arrangement and number of rooms are another influence on privacy. To illustrate the issues involved, a series of diagrammatic internal layouts are presented below in Figure 4, with the space syntax and a notation indicating the main use of each room. The use of the rooms is more flexible than the notation suggests, however as both the central hall, (central roofed space, as described by some respondents) or courtyard and the bedrooms may be used as a living space. All the layouts have a central area, whether covered as in the apartment blocks or uncovered as in the courtyard house, that is commonly used as a living area. For the sake of completeness, the diagrams also show the existence of a flat roof, where provided. The flat roof is typically walled for privacy and safety but did not figure in the discussions.

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Figure 4: Diagrammatic internal layouts

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In terms of the space syntax, all the internal layouts reveal a fan-like, branching pattern as is typical when rooms open from a central area, for example a hall or a courtyard rather than from other rooms. The larger courtyard house has a double buffer zone between the private rooms and the exterior. Both the larger courtyard house and the smaller courtyard house have a male guest room opening from the entrance buffer zones rather than the interior. Male visitors do not therefore have to pass through the central living area to reach the visitor's room. At Al-Ghadamsi, the entrance door to the male reception room opens onto the corridor leading to the private family spaces. Finally, at Ka Zalanges, the male guest room opens directly from the central living area in the apartment.

### *The scope for modification at Ka-Zalanges*

The occupants of the courtyard homes and of the Al-Ghadamsi apartments made few adverse comments about their homes. One commented of the Al-Ghadamsi apartment that 'These houses are pleasant ... to live in...spacious and comfortable...'. In contrast, the layout at Ka-Zalanges generated unfavourable comments.

‘Externally, it looked nice but internally it does not fit...what I don’t like about the internal layout is that you have to pass through the living room to enter the other rooms as we use the central roofed space (*central hall in an apartment*) as a living and dining area.’

In response, the occupants of Ka-Zalanges had commonly altered some of their features to make them more useable. A male respondent explained a series of internal modifications.

‘...The Italian-style/corridor house has .... home spaces arranged on both sides (*of the internal corridor*). But we could certainly rearrange the space to suit ourselves... the room next to the entrance was converted to guests’ room. It was a living and dining room (*in the original design*). We isolated bedrooms from the other spaces by creating a small corridor to create a private zone in the house...’

The respondent had found ways to ensure that the private area conformed to the ‘Libyan family’s home design’. Creating a private area meant that the altered rooms lacked a sense of ‘spaciousness’, but was possible. In upper floor apartments, ‘new’ space could also be obtained through the conversion of the balcony: In addition, those living on the ground floor had sometimes appropriated nearby garden areas.

Such modifications were not always popular, however. A male respondent living in Ka-Zalanges noted that some people had

‘closed off these open spaces (*balconies, side and back gardens*) to enlarge some internal spaces...or built a high fence around the side or back gardens. This is terrible, and makes the house very ugly, I wouldn’t have done so.’

For this respondent, the alterations showed disrespect to those neighbours who wanted to maintain the aesthetic value of the original.

### **Discussion: culture, religion and the home**

The comments of the respondents are fully in line with those references (Al-Haroun 2015; Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 2001; Webster 1984) that, using other methods, have argued that the traditional courtyard house continues to suit Arab lifestyles and family arrangements, above all the various arrangements and practices associated with privacy. Respondents living in the courtyard houses proudly described these as *houshArbi* [indigenous type] or *housh-Trabelsi* [Tripoli house]. The courtyard house is the ‘folk

house' to use the expression of El Aswad (2016) and still lives in the way respondents talk about their home in modern apartments. The way that some respondents as well as architects talk about the central room/ hallway in an apartment as 'roofed' can, for example, only be understood with reference to the unroofed open space at the heart of a courtyard house.

Moreover, the respondents living in apartments at Ka-Zalanges and Al-Ghadamsi made statements that suggested a preference for the main elements of a courtyard home or for some layout that is similar. The dislike of male guests entering directly into the private zone of the house, a particular concern at Ka-Zalanges is one indication. Statements to the effect that open space should be placed within the home structure is another. As the remarks of respondents suggest, traditional expectations about lifestyles, room arrangements and privacy persist when respondents live in dwellings whose design does not fully follow the traditional pattern.

In all visited homes, the space designated as private was for the family (husband, wife, and children) and close male relatives, as well as female visitors. The internal public or communal areas were for men and their male visitors (male social room). All these physical separations encoded at the time of the visit by the researcher, a sharp visual distinction between public and private areas within the home and so define a specific form of spatial practice within the home, behind its main entrance.

The distinction between private and public areas and the way that the respondents talk about those domains is consistent, moreover, with the traditional Arab concept (El Guindi 1999, 82) of the home as encompassing two spheres of privacy- family privacy and female privacy- both of which are defined by cultural and religious values. Respondents, both men and women, talked about the home as a place of family life and the way it had a meaning associated with family history. Equally the women talked about the home as a place of safety and protection for women and a place where they could respect domestic practices as a Muslim woman. The photographs illustrate this 'private own world'.

As was explicitly stated in the discussions, female privacy is closely related to the need to go covered in the street. The private domestic zone offers a place where women can relax behind a series of walls, interact with other women and where casual (non-kin) male visitors are excluded. Partly for this reason and partly because female privacy remains a cultural and religious ‘anchor’ (Sobh and Belk 2011), the home comes to represent a family and feminine ideal.

A clarification is necessary, however. The emphasis on privacy ran alongside an emphasis of hospitality and, as hospitality involves food preparation, this is also part of the woman's role in the home and was revealed in both the statements of the respondents and their choice of photographs, for example the carefully displayed and maintained tea sets. In addition, the sharp private/ public distinction apparent at the time of visit by a female researcher would have been compromised by the presence of a male stranger. Yet, the entrance of a female researcher could itself lead to a temporary re-arrangement in the use of the home. A bedroom might, be used as a temporary female guest room as occurred during some interviews. Another solution, noted by an architect, is that the presence of a female guest would lead to a restriction on the movement of males. The logical implication is that the private zone in the home is to an extent ‘fluid’ (El Guindi 1999, 77), certainly more flexible than is suggested merely through the room layout.

The meaning of the home and the meaning of privacy go together. Consequently, the meaning of privacy is influenced by religion and culture in a way that many published accounts (for example Madigan et al., 1990: Bowlby et al., 1997: Mallett, 2004) do not recognise. On the other hand, the meaning of the home remains tied to the sense of identity of the occupants and to what is already familiar to the individual, as others (for example Atkinson & Jacobs 2016: Hiscock et al, 2001: McCarthy 2018) have shown. Moreover, the home as an assemblage of objects and moveable elements collected over time contribute to that familiarity. This latter aspect of home, as a place of memory and a place for relaxation is not very different from the accounts of the home in the UK and elsewhere. (See for example Massey 2005, 9 and 124.) The pattern of responses reveals

similarities as well as differences, much as Engelke (2017, 60) suggests is the character of cultural analysis.

People living in dwellings that do not conform to their needs or expectations might be expected to undertake modifications, as Boudon ([1969] 1985) showed in the model village designed by Le-Corbusier. In the case study areas, the ability of the residents to make alterations was not, however, a means of helping residents ‘to realize what their needs were’, to use the words of Boudon (ibid, 141) and therefore as an indication of successful design. Instead, respondents, both male and female saw the need for modifications, if these were possible, as a necessary response to privacy problems or a lack of space, in other words as a failure. In some cases, the modifications upset neighbours, like the respondent from Ka-Zalanges who called them ‘horrible’.

The experience at Ka-Zalanges has another implication. Respondents may state they are ‘all right’, even if they have reservations. Residents may accept compromises, living somewhere that does not completely conform to their wishes for financial reasons or because the home has other redeeming features. To give a specific example, the courtyard houses in the Medina have little or no satisfactory off-street or near on-street parking, as was shown in the responses to the satisfaction survey and some parts of the Medina are, in any case, dilapidated. Such considerations may influence consumer preferences. As has been documented by Al-Haroun (2015) in Kuwait in a slightly different way, cultural and religious preferences may be offset by financial and by other consumer priorities.

Moreover, modern apartments vary in their quality and size. Those at Al-Ghadamsi were praised by respondents and scored better in terms of average satisfaction with the form and function of the house than those in Ka-Zalanges. The apartments at Al-Ghadamsi all have four bedrooms, whereas those at Ka-Zalanges have a mix of two, three and four bedrooms. (See Table 1.) The apartments of Al-Ghadamsi also have the male guest room leading off a corridor rather than a central living area.

The position of the architects interviewed in this study was consistent with that of the residents. The architects were clear that the housing stock in Tripoli had been Westernised rather than modernised, sometimes as a result of the unintended

consequences of technical regulation. They also noted the distinctive qualities of privacy in relation to the role of women in Islamic and Arab culture. The implicit argument of the architects was for a new modernity that, like the prescriptions of Fathy, would respect tradition and so gave meaning and order to residents, whilst incorporating new technologies in building and domestic equipment.

For Sobh and Belk (2011b), the Arab villa house already constitutes a new and, compared to the proposals of Fathy, a very different type of domestic modernity in which consumer preferences, a desire for conspicuous consumption and Arab tradition interact to produce a house type unlike those of the past and unlike, in addition, typical house types in Europe or North America. Almansuri et al (2010) and probably others would counter that, compared to the Arab villa, the courtyard house promotes sustainability (avoiding urban sprawl whilst providing non-mechanical cooling). Even so, the Arab villa shows that the courtyard house is not the only possible dwelling type capable of supporting the contemporary cultural and religious practices of Arab families and of meeting their expectations.

In terms of analytical frameworks and methodology, the multi-level approach of Lefèbvre has offered a means of contextualising the responses of residents and in providing insights into trends, ideologies and policy discourses in the Arab city, much as its supporters (Kipfer & Goonewardena 2013; Sabry 2010) would argue. There are some qualifications, however. The architects distanced themselves from the practices and proposals of earlier governmental regimes, so suggesting that the 'abstract level of social reality' (Lefèbvre ([1974] 2007) may be characterised by significant divisions and change. Moreover, the architects distanced themselves from earlier governmental regimes with the deliberate intention of bringing the level of abstract design ideas closer to the contract reality of reality, as they understood this.

In addition, the distinction also made by Lefèbvre between space as lived and space as perceived is not always easy to apply. The satisfaction questionnaire collapsed the lived/ perceived space distinction, whilst also showing that the use and evaluation of even the interior of the home has many different design elements. Qualitative interviews and



focus groups are more sensitive to meaning, but also show the close relation between lived and perceived space in the context of domestic routines that are partly regulated by religion.

Finally, the implications of the space syntax are consistent with the case studies undertaken by Emhemed (2005, 180) and Mustafa et al (2010) amongst others, in showing that the courtyard houses are less 'permeable' than the modern apartments, meaning that they contain more controlled access points between the private areas of the home and the exterior. They have therefore a greater depth of privacy. The depth of privacy is, moreover, reinforced by the absence of a second entrance, a back door, as is the usual pattern in houses (though not of course most apartments) in the UK and elsewhere. Equally, however, the space syntax analysis repeats the ambiguities noted by critics of the method. Those interviewed did not talk about privacy in terms of reduced permeability or the number of access points between the inside and outside of the dwelling. Instead they were concerned about the position of the guest room for male visitors and, in some cases in the apartments, the extent of overlooking from the outside.

## **Conclusion**

Much of the interest in the courtyard house has stemmed from those (Allafi 2010) who are seeking to repair the traditional identity of the Arab city. Given the comments of respondents, both male and female, the development of courtyard housing could well be popular, so long as wider expectations about family life and privacy remain traditional in character. These same comments also suggest the possibility of renewed conservation efforts in the Medina, so long as problems of neighbourhood dilapidation are also tackled.

The feasibility of any planned house building or conservation programme is another question, however. Implementation would assume adequate capacity on the part of government. In addition, even if the government in Libya were sufficiently stable, and this a general comment covering many countries, there are economic and affordability constraints. Though the courtyard home is not just the preserve of the rich, it is progressively more difficult to realise in the context of a demand for more living space.

As the discussions with the architects revealed, a demand for living space within the confines of existing and suitable building plots encourages a tendency to fill in the courtyards and to build multi-storey blocks.

Affordability constraints are another consideration. Indeed, the existence of multi-occupation suggest that affordability have already started to constrain housing choices. Documenting how families cope with a lack of space and with multi-occupancy is therefore a research priority for the future. In addition, as some of the architects also recognised, conventional forms of top-down regulation and planning have done little or nothing to resolve problems from the perspective of users, exactly as both the ‘Global South’ critique (Watson 2009) and the earlier critique of Lefèbvre ([1974] 2007) would predict.

Whatever the outcome, the maintenance of tradition is not just a set of beliefs that are handed down automatically and unreflexively from one generation to another. The respondents talked self-consciously about tradition, culture, religion and its implications for the role of women, for privacy and for the organisation of the home. Likewise, processes of modernisation are not inevitable. Respondents, both male and female, clearly endorsed traditional Arab concepts of the home, of privacy and of gender separation.

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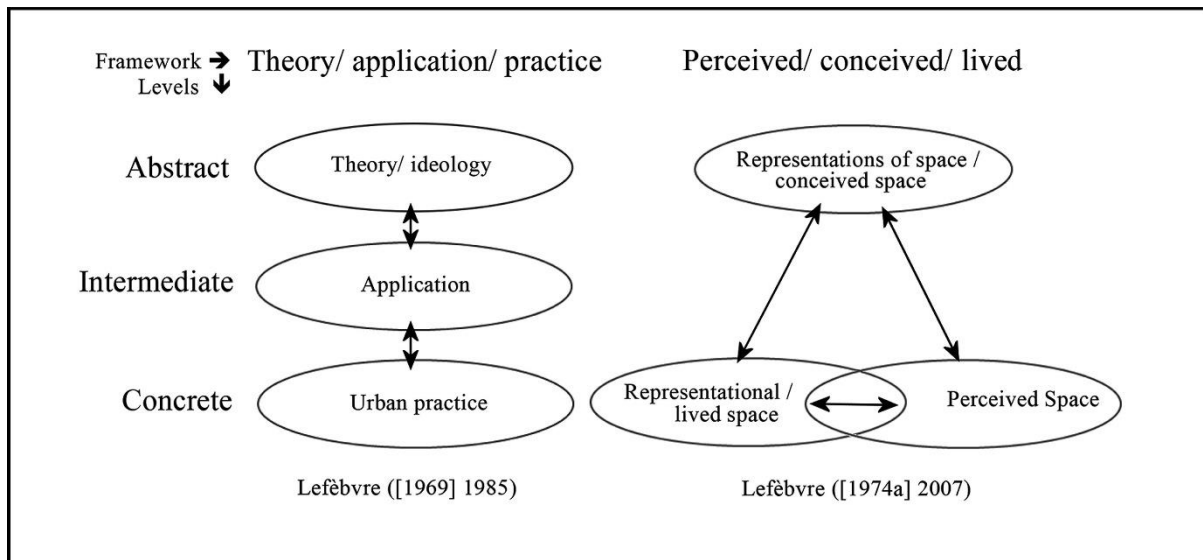


Figure 1: Epistemological frameworks for the analysis of the home as space.

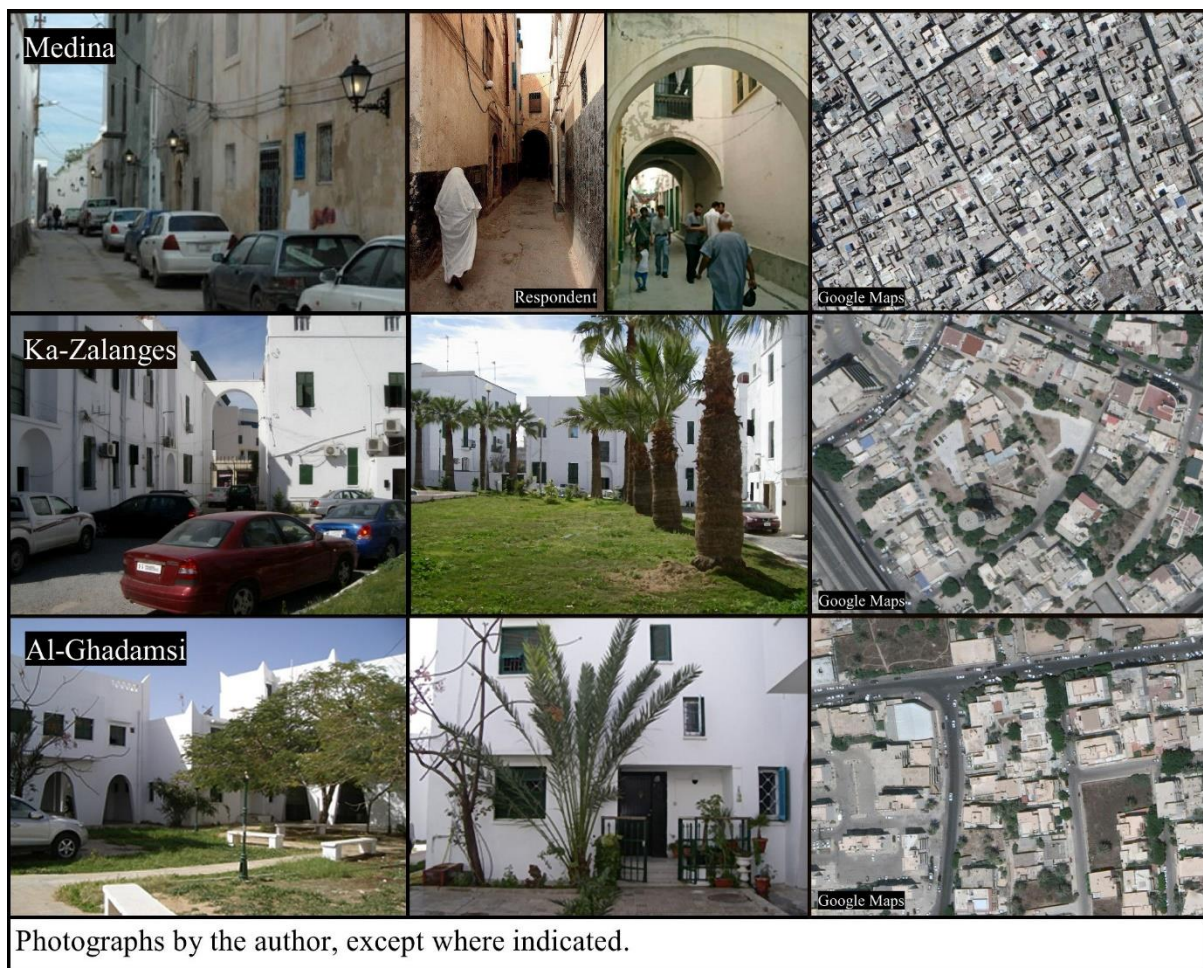


Figure 2: The case study sites.





Figure 3: A female 'private own world'.

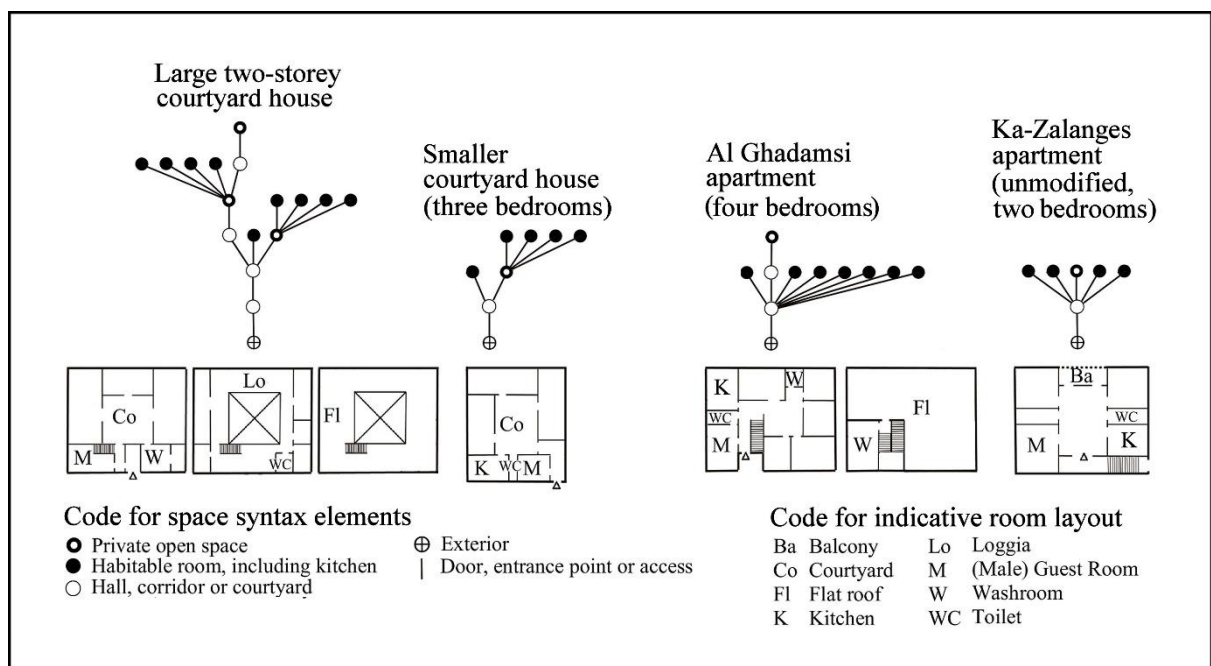


Figure 4. Diagrammatic internal layouts.



Table 1. Key features of the case study schemes.

<b>Key Facts</b>	<b>High-Density Traditional</b>	<b>Collective-housing Ka-Zalanges</b>	<b>Collective-housing Al-Ghadamsi</b>
<b>Location</b>	The Medina district Central Tripoli	Al-Zawiay street, Al Dahra, Tripoli	Zawiyat Al-Dahmani, Tripoli
<b>Design &amp; completion date</b>	19 <sup>th</sup> century Islamic city, Ottoman style (1835- 1911)	Designed: 1933 Completion: 1935, Italian colonial	Designed: 1982 Completion: 1983 Oil boom
<b>Number of Dwellings</b>	Bab El baher quarter 1200 Units' samples selected: 240	84 units	12 units
<b>Dwelling mix</b>	3 bedrooms 67 units 4 bedrooms 58 units 5 bedrooms 90 units 6 bedrooms 25 units	2 bedrooms 26 units 3 bedrooms 30 units 4 bedrooms 28 units	4 bedrooms
<b>Other provision</b>	Mosques, school, shops, and public square	Community facilities nearby, outdoor communal open space	Outdoor communal open space
<b>Density</b>	App. 57 dwellings per hectare App. 982 habitable rooms per hectare	38 dwellings per hectare 54 habitable rooms per hectare	25 dwellings units per hectare 50 habitable rooms per hectare
<b>Forms of tenure</b>	138 Owner occupied 78 Rented 24 Multi-occupied (rented)	65 Owner occupied 19 Rented	12 Owner occupied
<b>Transport access</b>	City-centre location provides pedestrian access to facilities	City centre location, (off road parking)	Main roads' access to city centre and other facilities parking mainly on-street

Source: Author based on unpublished work by The Engineering and Consulting Office for Utilities (Libya).

Table 2: Average levels of satisfaction

Housing features/ qualities	Scheme-1 Traditional courtyard			Scheme-2 Ka-Zalanges residence			Scheme-3 Al-Ghadamsi residence		
	V.S	S	Dis-S	V.S	S	Dis-S	V.S	S	Dis-S
Form & Function of House	80%	13%	7%	14%	29%	57%	66%	34%	0%
Maintenance	59%	25%	16%	86%	10%	4%	83%	16%	1%
Enough No. of Bedrooms	64%	27%	9%	6%	46%	48%	40%	60%	0%
Bathroom/Toilets	59%	32%	9%	29%	57%	14%	42%	58%	0%
Male-reception	59%	25%	16%	13%	21%	66%	46%	54%	0%
Female-reception	62%	36%	2%	43%	17%	40%	20%	71%	9%
Storage Area	20%	33%	47%	27%	34%	39%	11%	47%	42%
Kitchen Size	13%	20%	67%	37%	43%	20%	45%	50%	5%
Spare room for multi-purpose use	53%	37%	10%	0%	0%	100%	12%	37%	51%
Garden/Terrace/Yard/Patio	77%	20%	3%	63%	31%	6%	76%	15%	9%
Dining Area	93%	5%	2%	33%	31%	36%	77%	21%	2%
Accessible Toilet for guests	51%	40%	9%	6%	28%	66%	32%	68%	0%
Off road car parking	0%	20%	80%	21%	18%	61%	12%	30%	58%
Private garage & outside storage	0%	0%	100%	9%	14%	77%	3%	9%	88%
Adequate living room (size and centrality)	60%	37%	3%	36%	21%	43%	61%	39%	0%
Privacy	91%	0%	9%	51%	33%	16%	37%	47%	16%
Security & Safety	27%	67%	7%	58%	34%	8%	34%	25%	41%
Energy Consumption	60%	38%	2%	17%	27%	56%	12%	27%	61%
Recycle & Waste Collection	0%	2%	98%	20%	24%	56%	19%	33%	48%
Numbers	150			60			12		
Response rate	63%			85%			100%		
Code: V.S- very satisfied: S- satisfied: Dis-S- dissatisfied									

Source: Author